

REVISITING THE TUDOR MYTH IN SANDRA WORTH'S *THE ROSE OF YORK TRILOGY*

A Contribution in Reassessing Richard III

Susana Paula de Magalhães Oliveira*

King Richard III is perhaps one of the most controversial English monarchs. Notwithstanding his short-term reign, from 1483 to 1485, the last Plantagenet king has caught the attention – and imagination – of innumerable authors throughout the centuries. Historians, biographers, playwrights, novelists, academic researchers – to mention but a few – have engaged in the Ricardian studies, hoping to throw some light upon this king's life and reign. Ultimately, one can assume that they are all merely “looking for Richard”, as suggested in Al Pacino's 1996 film, hoping to find the facts amidst the fiction, the truth within the myth, looking for the real Richard III. Paradoxically enough, this monarch is still an enigma, possibly due to what Jeremy Potter has acknowledged: “Myth-making is the creation of fiction more enduring than fact” (120).

As Northrop Frye observed, the word ‘myth’ is used quite indiscriminately and therefore an adequate context for the use of this expression in this essay is essential (3-17). The term ‘myth’ stems from intricate and multidimensional concepts, especially when related to History. Peter Munz admits that “there are many forms of myths and many forms of history; and any attempt to lay down what the essential form of either myth or history is, is likely to lead to an arbitrary definition” (1956:1). According to the Penguin's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, although originally Homer did not use *mūthos* in the sense of ‘fiction’, the expression rapidly evolved into that meaning; later, Plato referred to *mūthoi* to designate something for the most part fictitious; and, at present, the term *myth* is generally applied to a story which is not ‘true’ (525,526). For the purpose of the present analysis of Richard III in relation to the Tudor Myth, it is important to recognise that the physical and psychological portrait of the king derives from a substantial literary *corpus* produced by the Tudor writers – including Thomas More and William Shakespeare – and not from official records, as will be later mentioned. As the Tudor monarchs

* University of Lisbon, Centre for English Studies.

increasingly achieved a 'supernatural' status in the fictional works of the period, so did Richard III evolved into the role of the villain, mostly due to the authors' literary skills and powerful imagery. Hence, it is in the sense of 'fiction' as a product of a literary work that 'myth' is used in this essay. As Maria de Jesus C. Relvas observes,

Richard III assumed forever a fictional dimension, more than any other character in history, in the sense that Richard III became a literary creation, a feat achieved by means of complex rhetorical devices. Fact and fiction have probably never been mixed in such an inextricable way. (2003:184)

In fact, it is exceptionally challenging, even today, to disengage from More's and Shakespeare's depictions of the monarch. Surely when thinking about Richard III, one often recalls the hunchbacked villain's last words in the play by William Shakespeare: "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!" (*King Richard III* 5.4.13) These words reverberate what was commonly accepted in Shakespeare's times about this monarch's life and fate: the king, who had usurped the throne, thus preventing the divine right of the legitimate king from being fulfilled, had brought upon himself the wrath of God. As a result for upsetting the worldly order, the 'wicked' Richard III had lost his kingdom, a sign of 'divine justice' as assured in the Holy Scriptures: "To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand" (*Authorised King James Version*, Deuteronomy 32:35). The day of Richard's calamity was 22nd August 1485. In the context of the Wars of the Roses, the Houses of York – under Richard III's command – and Lancaster – led by Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond – confronted each other in Bosworth Field, where the king died in combat. The victorious leader became Henry VII, collectively presented as a protagonist of God's will and vengeance, the restorer of the worldly order as God's ordained king, the founder of the solid Tudor dynasty, which brought together the Houses of Lancaster and York; a hero. It should, however, be pointed out that subliminally embedded in the rise of this newly-formed dynasty was a very complex and disturbing fact regarding royal lineage: the last Plantagenet king had an indisputable right to the throne of England, whereas the new king's claim was, in fact, weak and controversial. Therefore, it was Henry VII's utmost concern to strengthen and preserve the dynasty he founded. What later became known as the Tudor Myth was then set in motion: numerous authors' accounts collectively presented Henry VII as a hero and Richard III as the antithesis of Henry VII's grandeur, the materialisation of the classical model of the villain. This myth-manufacture operated on two fronts: *text production* by chroniclers, historians, scholars and playwrights; and *text destruction*, as Paul Murray Kendall observed: "Henry [VII] saw to it that his first Parliament passed an act ordering all copies of enactment of Richard's Parliament of 1484 to be seized and burned" (554). Here, one must pause and ponder: just what type of evidence – factual (or fictitious), convincing (or doubtful) – survived this Tudor's endeavour? It is no wonder, therefore, that we still find ourselves today 'looking for Richard', for "*Myth-making is the creation of fiction more enduring than fact*"... (Jeremy Potter 120).

The complex debate regarding what is known as the Tudor Myth has endured through time. Presently, scholars are divided into two main streams of thought concerning Ricardian studies: the traditionalists – who take Richard III as a villain and a usurper according to the Tudor historical perspective – and the revisionists or Ricardians – who regard Richard III as a victim of Tudor propaganda, underlining the monarch’s high-standard values and governmental abilities¹. The debate was even brought to the media’s attention, when, for example, in 1984, BBC Channel 4 gathered a group of eminent scholars in a programme entitled “The Trial of Richard III”². The Internet has also been used as a significant means to keep the debate around Richard III’s controversy alive, mainly through *The Richard III Society Website*, with its countless branches around the world, whose resolution is to foster research into the life and times of Richard III and to secure a reassessment of the material regarding this period³. In fact, this purpose, together with “the hope of disproving the myths that sustain Richard III was a wicked tyrant”⁴, became pivotal to Philippa Langley, a member of the Richard III Society. In 2009, she set in motion a challenging mission to find the last Plantagenet king’s remains. In September 2012, at the site of a car park – which used to be the medieval friary known as The Greyfriars, in Leicester – the archaeological diggings became successful. On Monday 4th February 2013, Leicester University announced, in a live press conference, that Richard III’s remains had been found. “The dead king in the car park” became a world tagline that reached the press, the television channels and the book industry⁵. Nonetheless, the discovery of what is now assumed to be Richard III’s skeleton, presenting a very pronounced curve in the spine as evidence of scoliosis, would turn out to be disturbingly unsettling for both the traditionalist and the revisionist communities. Richard III had resurfaced in the 21st century as the epicentre of a fierce debate, now revolving around subjects as forensic science, radiocarbon dating, DNA evidence, archaeological techniques, osteology and genealogy, all of which have been abundantly publicised in the media. Interestingly enough, and for the purpose of this paper, it is strikingly surprising to note how often the press uses the term ‘myth’ in the articles concerning Richard III⁶.

1 Among others, Michael Hicks and Alison Weir as “traditionalists” and John Ashdown-Hill and Annette Carson as “revisionists”.

2 For more on “The Trial of Richard III” see *The Richard III Society Website*, “Richard in the Media.” <<http://www.richardiii.net/tv.htm#c4trial>>.

3 For more on The Richard III Society’s mission see *The Richard III Society Website*, “Mission.” <<http://www.richardiii.net/>>.

4 “Looking for Richard: Getting started”, *The Richard III Society Website*. <http://www.richardiii.net/leicester_dig.php>.

5 Particularly the documentary “Richard III: The king in the car park” for Channel 4 that won the Royal Television Society Programme Awards for 2013 in the History category and Morris’s and Buckley’s book *Richard III: The King Under the Car Park: The Story of the Search for England’s Last Plantagenet King*.

6 See, for example, David Shariatmandari’s article “Are they Richard III’s remains? To ask the question is to miss the point”. *The Guardian*. <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/30/richard-iii-remains-question-bones>>.

In this context, Sandra Worth's trilogy achieves an undeniable significance. This critically acclaimed author has won multiple awards for her work both as a researcher and a novelist. I will therefore focus on Sandra Worth's (re)visitation of the Tudor Myth in her *The Rose of York Trilogy* novels: *Love & War*, published in 2003; *Crown of Destiny*, published in 2006; and *Fall from Grace*, published in 2007. Is this 21st century historical novelist re-writing the Tudor Myth? How has the author's research contributed to a different and credible insight into Richard III's life and reign? One could argue that fiction is not expected to contribute to such matters in a significant way – especially when one considers the statement “never let the facts get in the way of a good story” – but I would like to stress a different point of view: Sandra Worth has found a means to a reliable contribution in reassessing Richard III.

The Rose of York Trilogy's authenticity and accuracy concerning the historical facts are supported by Worth's extensive research and use of credible sources. This author, who has a double major in Political Science and Economics from the University of Toronto, spent ten years researching Richard III's era, made nearly a dozen trips to study Ricardian sites in England and Bruges, interviewed several notable Ricardian scholars, visited numerous university libraries and obtained privileges at the British Museum. (Worth, *Fall* 253- 254).

Sandra Worth admitted that she was in search of the true Richard, and her narratives, although fictional, confirm her effort to keep the story true to the historical facts. One important contribution to this achievement was, as Worth mentioned, Paul Murray Kendall's *Richard the Third* biography, where she claims to have ‘found’ Richard (*Love & War* 327-328). Paul Murray Kendall's comprehensive work has been a fundamental source in every informed study on Richard III, ever since it was first published, in 1955. Those who are familiar with Kendall's *Richard the Third* extensive biography find the very same Richard in Sandra Worth's *The Rose of York Trilogy*, although supplied with a voice that verbalises his thoughts, anguishes, passions, values, and ideals.

In the “Author's Note” of *Love & War*, Worth states what caught her imagination and inspired her to write about Richard III: his portrait at the National Gallery, London (*Love & War* 327). She further discloses:

His noble features and gentle expression gave the lie to Shakespeare's description of him as an ugly hunchback, and the more I read about Richard III, the more difficult it became to reconcile the actions of his life with his reputation in history as an evil villain. (*Fall* 253)

In this context, Worth's reference to Richard III's portrait – the one which has claimed to authenticity⁷ – confirms the inter-relation established between the pictorial and the poetic – *senso lato* – languages. The fact that Worth specifically

7 In the sense of being closely derived from the subject's actual appearance and not from the portrayed hunchbacked monster of More's and Shakespeare's depictions of Richard III.

mentions Richard's face is even more thought-provoking, especially in the light of Oscar Wilde's remark: "A man's face is his autobiography" (1055). As Roman Jakobson notes, it is possible to keep a painting present in one's mind – as a whole before our eyes – even when we are no longer looking at it (*Language in Literature* 472-473). The reference to the clear image of Richard's face – which remains at the back of the reader's mind throughout the space and time of plot development – draws our attention to the idea of verisimilitude regarding Worth's narrative: it is as if the real Richard is present, as a witness, overseeing the historical narrative of his life. And Worth follows Richard's itinerary as a king, providing her readers with precise dates, even as to the days of the week (*Fall* 254).

Although Richard is the central character in *The Rose of York Trilogy* and we learn greatly about him, Worth seems to invest as much effort in describing the historical events, the settings, and other historical characters as she does in describing Richard. Amongst several noteworthy examples, Worth informs her readers about Elizabeth of York's vegetarian diet (a diet she extends to Anne Neville), as recorded in *Stow's Survey of London*, in which we confirm that in the ninth year of Henry VII's reign, sixty dishes were served to the queen, none of which were meat or fish (116).

All in all, Worth's emphasis on historical details and her scrutiny of the historical characters' personal traits converge to confirm the author's main argument throughout the narrative: a subversion of the traditionalist perspective on Richard III, by exploring all the elements of the narrative leading to the themes of loyalty, honour, truthfulness, and ultimate vindication.

Moreover, Worth supplies each chapter with a quotation from Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, a clear reference to the association of Richard's life and kingdom to the legend of King Arthur, his knights and their chivalric code. One quotation in particular lingers throughout the entire sequel, as a confirmation not only of the theme the author explores but also of the argument she makes: "Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King" (Tennyson, *Idylls* 39; *Love & War* 13; *Fall* 238). These ideals guide Richard's life ever since we meet him in the first book of the sequel, as a frightened 8-year-old boy who had just lost his father, up until his last day in the Battle of Bosworth, as described in the last chapter of the trilogy:

He felt at one... with his men. They were all with him, all the men of his household... loyal knights, ready to battle the mass of the enemy reserves... Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King – This was what it was all about. Loyalty. Justice. To fight for right. (*Fall* 238)

But evidence indicates, just as Worth describes, that Richard suffered a last treacherous blow that day, when the Stanleys suddenly changed sides and ultimately destroyed the strategic plan of the Yorkist army. Once more, Worth remains true to the historical facts: the Stanleys – Sir William Stanley and his brother Lord Thomas Stanley, Earl of Derby – were closely related to Henry Tudor, since Thomas Stanley was Henry's stepfather. However, Richard had kept them in his

service, had granted them titles and estates, just as Henry's mother, Margaret Beaufort, had served as one of Queen Anne Neville's ladies at court and it was she, the mother of the future Henry VII, who carried Anne's train and stood on her side on the day of Richard's and Anne's coronation (*Croyland Chronicle* 489-90; Mancini 122-123; Kendall 273; Worth, *Fall* 22-24). One might consider this attitude of the king – and of the royal couple by extent – to stem from the wish to keep the enemies close in order to control them. But if we reflect upon Richard's first recorded decision as king, we will identify the signs of the monarch's ideals: on Thursday, June 26 1483, Richard summoned one of his most dangerous enemies, the Woodville Sir John Fogge, and, in front of a great assembly of nobles, prelates, gentry and citizens, he took Fogge by the hand and swore to be his friend, appointing him Justice of Peace for the county of Kent. As Paul Murray Kendall observed: "[Richard was] thus demonstrating his determination to rule without malice or partiality" (265-266). Worth's literary account of the event elaborates on Richard's speech:

As it is my wish that all men should be seen as equal in the eyes of the law, you are ordered to dispense justice without fear or favour... Man's justice should reflect God's justice... This day, past treasons are forgiven and hatreds set aside... I swear to you my friendship, John Fogge, and as evidence of my regard and faith in you, I appoint you Justice of the Peace for the county of Kent.... *Aye, it will take time for them to accept such revolutionary concept*, he thought. (*Crown* 162)

In spite of the high-standard example Richard set that day, some of his subjects would eventually fail to keep their loyalty to the king and his ideals. As for those who died with the king in the battlefield at Bosworth – or soon after by Henry Tudor's orders – the ideal expressed in Richard's motto, *Loyaulté me lie* or *Loyalty binds me*, seemed to justify their death. Even Henry VII's official historian, Polydore Vergil, records that King Richard had been "killyd fyghting manfully in the thickest presse of his enemyes" (224). Once again, Richard's inner thoughts come to surface in Worth's narrative:

A knight must throw down his gauntlet to the Devil and fight for right against the servants of sin. Whether you win or lose matters not, only whether you follow the quest... Virtue always prevails. (*Love & War* 48)

Both as a result and a confirmation of his principles, Richard has left a legacy of the greatest significance, as Worth emphasises:

Richard III gave us a body of laws that forms the foundation of modern Western society... [that] includes bail, the presumption of innocence, protections in the jury system against bribery... and... the concept that all men should be seen as equal in the eyes of the law (*Love & War* 327).

Worth further discloses: “He was the first king to proclaim his laws in English so that poor men could know their rights and the first to raise a Jew to England’s knighthood” (*Love & War* 327). The Jew mentioned by Worth was Duarte Brandão, the Portuguese ship commander who won Richard’s trust and friendship, known in the English court by the name of Edward Brampton. Richard did not merely knight Duarte Brandão/Edward Brampton in 1484, but he also appointed him to a position of relevance in the affairs of the kingdom.

Although Worth is a historical novelist, the themes she explores in *The Rose of York Trilogy* – loyalty, honour, truthfulness, and ultimate vindication – and the argument she puts forward – a subversion of the traditionalist perspective on Richard III – are based upon credible evidence. When considering the villain king depicted in the Tudor Myth accounts, one realises that Worth is, in fact, reconstructing the myth, elevating Richard III to the level of the hero, a man ahead of his time. In reassessing this much maligned king in *The Rose of York* sequel, one might conclude that Worth is also attempting to ‘right wrong’ and to prove that in the end, “*Myth-making is the creation of fiction although, hopefully, not always more enduring than fact...*” or rather, as she states in the last words of the sequel, quoting Richard’s father, the Duke of York, “truth shall not perish”.

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